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SUBJECT: SUPERMARKET RAIDS SPUR GOS TO FOCUS ON ROMA NEEDS

¶11. (SBU) Summary. Throughout February, Roma activists raised the alarm about coming changes in the welfare system and have called for national strikes. Beginning February 18, organized groups of Roma have raided grocery stores, primarily in South-Eastern Slovakia to steal alcohol, cigarettes, and candy. GOS officials and independent journalists have told emboffs that political campaigning in Roma settlements is responsible for tensions in the region. At the February 25 cabinet meeting, the GOS approved 12 recommendations negotiated by Labor Minister Kanik and Roma leaders to assist Roma to obtain jobs and maximize social benefits. End summary.

Changes in the Social Benefit System

¶12. (U) One element of the government's sweeping economic reforms is cutting social benefits for some unemployed while providing incentives to seek jobs. Recognizing the dearth of employment opportunities in parts of Slovakia, the central government allocated funds to municipalities, which in turn were supposed to create community service jobs. Unemployed individuals who performed such jobs would receive a "bonus" payment in their social benefits. The new system of social benefits will take effect March 1. Unfortunately the municipalities and local labor offices are still unprepared to implement the programs designed to take the bite out of the benefit cuts.

¶13. (U) As word spread about the impending reductions in social benefits, many Roma communities became alarmed. Roma will be particularly affected by the cuts, especially those in settlements, where unemployment can reach 100 percent. Most leaders, such as Government Plenipotentiary for Roma Klara Orgovanova, called for Roma to protest through legal means. Others called for more radical measures.

Looting in Eastern Slovakia

¶14. (U) On February 18, eighty Roma looted a supermarket in Levoca in eastern Slovakia. Local Roma residents claimed they needed to steal food for their families in light of the changes to the welfare system. Grocery store looting spread to several other towns, with the latest tactic to send women and children, since police are reluctant to use force against them. Store owners report that staples like bread and milk are not looted; alcohol, cigarettes, and candy disappear. In the southeastern town of Trebisov February 24, police believed several hundred Roma intended to loot a store, and they dispersed the group using high-pressure water hoses and tear gas.

¶15. (U) The increasing violence has alarmed citizens of all ethnic groups. The Association of Young Roma in Banska Bystrica warned that the store looting might grow into a national problem full of "xenophobia, brutality and hate." The Roma Council of Slovakia is cooperating with police to calm the social turmoil, and proposed creating a guard force involving Roma themselves.

What is Really Behind the Violence?

¶16. (SBU) Initially, some press reports and government officials said that Roma usurers had organized the raiding parties out of fear they would lose income when benefits decrease. Orgovanova told emboffs that usurers, while highly influential in Roma communities, were not the main cause of the looting and protests. Rather, prominent Roma leaders and members of political parties are campaigning in Roma settlements against current GOS reforms, which has contributed to the escalation of tensions in the region.

¶17. (SBU) A reporter for Roma newspaper Romano Lil, Denisa Havrlova, informed POL assistant that Roma from settlements and other friends from eastern Slovak villages have told her about communist party (KSS) members going around and instigating people to rebellion. They argue that Roma were much better off during the former regime when they had enough to eat, they had jobs, and were taken care of. Now they don't have any of this and so as soon as this government is out, a new government (including the KSS) may be able to help them much more effectively.

18. (SBU) An MP from PM Dzurinda's SDKU party told P/E chief February 24 that the same forces behind organizing the April 3 referendum on early elections--including the labor unions and SMER party--were behind the tumult in Roma communities. In addition, Jana Kviecinska, the Director of the Government Office for Human Rights, told POL assistant that she knows about communists, labor unionists and other political activists of the opposition visiting Roma and inciting them against the GOS. They are urging Roma to participate in the

April 3 referendum, by promising improvement of their situation after the fall of the Dzurinda government.

Initial Government Action

19. (U) The GOS has reinforced security in eastern Slovakia with 2000 extra police and 1000 soldiers. Prime Minister Dzurinda and Minister of Interior Palko traveled to Kosice February 24 for a first-hand view. The same day, Minister for Labor and Social Affairs Kanik brainstormed with Roma leaders on ways to diffuse the situation.

10. (SBU) Ladislav Richter, Chair of the Council of Roma NGO's, told POL assistant that Kanik and his staff were very forthcoming. They agreed on twelve points to assist Roma to obtain jobs and maximize social benefits. Most notably, Kanik accepted Richter's proposal that Roma NGO's, in addition to municipalities, be able to obtain government funding to create community service jobs. In addition, the Roma leaders agreed with Kanik that in early March Richter will try to put together a session of Roma leaders from all over Slovakia to meet with economy ministers, Kanik, Palko and Dzurinda. They hope to find some mechanism to resolve this crisis.

Government Approves Labor Minister's Recommendations

11. (SBU) The cabinet held a February 25 meeting to decide how to react to the Roma concerns and avoid further violence, at which Kanik presented the "Twelve Points." Kviecinska, a long-time human rights activist, phoned POL assistant immediately after the meeting. She was very happy with Dzurinda's leadership on the issue and the decisions reached by the GOS. She said all the economic ministers were very well prepared for the session and were very constructive. The PM opened the meeting by saying, "This is the time for action and we have to get things done!" Kviecinska was very excited about the outcome.

112. (SBU) The GOS approved the Twelve Points, including Richter's proposal to allow NGO's, organizations like Red Cross, and charities to assist Roma through creating community jobs. Civil servants dealing with social issues will work closer to Roma; some of them will be administering services directly in settlements. Ministers were asked to find more job opportunities and subsidies for "persons with long-term unemployment," i.e. Roma. The GOS also extended the age limit for practical training (which graduates from any type of school may use) to 25 years. Employers receive state subsidies for each person they employ, and the apprenticeship time is calculated into retirement benefits. Kviecinska said this will help young Roma. She added that many of these things could have been adopted before, "but there was no political will. However, finally the GOS took real action!" (Comment: We understand these measures do not require parliamentary action.)

13. (U) The Twelve Points (Note internal numbering)

1) Increase bonus for those in community service jobs from SKK 1,000 to 1,500, beginning in April or September 2004.

2) Take preventive measures against usury: pay social benefits more often, in goods, monitored by the police in the worst-affected localities.

3) Provide bonuses for organizers of larger "activation programs" (creating community service jobs for more than 100 workers) including municipalities and NGOs.

4) Motivate employers to hire long-term unemployed: government will pay for the training selected by the employer for up to 10,000 SKK

5) Extend the age limit for the post-school practice period to 25 years; lengthen the period of the practice beyond current six months, increase the benefit from 1,000 to 1,500 SK. Community service work should be recognized as one of the forms of the practice.

6) Apply all reform laws systematically. Increase information of both unemployed and officials about the full range of possible social benefits, ensure all municipal offices are able to provide them.

- 7) Increase social stipends for high school students, including transportation costs to and from the school.
- 8) Assist elementary schools students by providing free meals, textbooks, and school supplies in areas with high unemployment. Perhaps provide parents with transitory one time contribution for costs related with school attendance (shoes).
- 9) Reconsider the price structure for utilities; set an existential minimum of utilities (a strictly limited package for a minimum price).

10) Reimburse travel costs related to seeking a job.

11) Take action against usury, by police and law enforcement agencies.

12) Speed up the start of the Fund for Social Development, which will provide for community partnerships for social inclusion, and start programs specifically for the inhabitants of settlements.

Comment

14. (SBU) It is too early to tell whether the government's "Twelve Points" will entirely calm the situation, but the GOS has surprised many by acting swiftly and decisively. With just over a month before the Presidential election and referendum on early elections, political interests are playing a leading role in the development of this social issue. Emboffs will meet with Roma activists and local officials in eastern Slovakia February 26 and 27.

THAYER

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